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LANGUAGE BROKERING IN LINGUISTIC MINORITY  
COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF CHINESE- AND  
VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN STUDENTS

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**Abstract**

Language brokers facilitate communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties. Unlike formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than merely transmit, information. Recent research suggests that language minority (LM) students who broker assume parental duties that include making educational decisions and communicating directly with schools, which greatly impacts their own educational experiences. The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence of this phenomenon among Chinese- and Vietnamese-American bilingual students, and to explore the linguistic, cultural, and affective factors associated with brokering. The results suggest that nearly all of the subjects brokered for a variety of people in the home and at school, among many other settings, and that brokering has a number of affective and linguistic consequences for LM students. The implications of these findings for educators and policy makers are discussed.

**Introduction**

Recent evidence suggests that language minority (LM) students who interpret and translate between home and school play a pivotal role in determining their own educational experiences (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1995; Tse, 1996). Language brokers, as these interpreters and translators are called, do far more than transmit information. In many

cases, they take on the responsibility of making educational and other decisions for themselves and their family, decisions normally made by their parents. Acting as brokers also causes positive and negative affective results that greatly impact students' views of themselves and their language learning experiences. This study will examine the prevalence and nature of brokering and its effect on LM students.

### **Literature Review**

The brokering examined in this and other studies is defined as interpretation and translation performed in everyday situations by bilinguals who have had no special training. Harris and Sherwood (1978) suggest that natural interpreting and translating are skills developed in all bilinguals from the time they begin learning a second language. Harris (1977) suggests that interpretation, even that done by young children, is not simply linguistic decoding, but rather the extraction of meaning from the words and context that requires the application of other knowledge. He examined the interpreting performed by a three-year-old subject, Michael, and found that he possessed sophisticated cognitive and linguistic ability and was able to interpret even subtleties. Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) examined the translation done by 68 Spanish-English child bilinguals and found that they could not only translate, but could do so accurately. Malakoff and Hakuta suggest that bilinguals who interpret possess metalinguistic awareness, defined as "an awareness of the underlying linguistic nature of language use," and interpretation strategies, in addition to the cognitive and linguistic skills suggested by Harris (1977, p. 147).

The little research that has been done on brokering suggests that child brokers from many different cultures and languages perform a variety of tasks and take on broad roles as mediators and decision-makers (Downing & Dwyer, 1981; Harris & Sherwood, 1978; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984, Shannon, 1990). One example is Harris and Sherwood's (1978) Italian-Canadian subject, BS, who, when interpreting for her father in business transactions, chose the most culturally and linguistically appropriate interpretation of her father's words so as to increase the chances of a successful outcome.

Father to BS: "*Digli che è un imbecille !*" (Tell him he's a nitwit.)  
 BS to 3rd party: "My father won't accept your offer." Father  
 angrily in Italian: "Why didn't you tell him what I told you?" (p.  
 157)

In a study by McQuillan and Tse (1995), nine bilingual subjects from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds - Cambodian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Mexican-American - were interviewed about their brokering experiences as children. All had acted, at one time or another, as primary decision makers for the family and took on the role as socializing agents by conveying important cultural information about school, governmental, and business procedures, and facilitating personal and official interactions among teachers, neighbors, friends, parents, siblings, and other relatives.

The added responsibilities brokers assume appear to have mixed affective consequences. While brokers reported negative effects that included added stress and burden, they also reported positive results such as increased confidence, independence and maturity, acquisition of first and second cultural knowledge, and the establishment of trusting relationships with their parents (Downing & Dwyer, 1981; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Shannon, 1990).

Aside from the perceived benefits above, subjects also reported that brokering spurred their language development, especially their acquisition of English. Subjects sought out resources, including peers and adults, and textual aids such as bilingual dictionaries, to help complete linguistically demanding tasks normally performed by adults (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). These challenging tasks included completing governmental forms, translating bank statements, writing school and business-related correspondence, and providing interpretation between educators, customers, relatives, and other agents.

While these case studies in the literature provide valuable information about broker experiences and confirm that brokers exist across various cultural and language backgrounds, the prevalence of this phenomenon in LM communities remains unexamined. The purpose of this study, then, is to discover how common brokering is among LM students and to confirm some of the above affective and linguistic findings by surveying a broader population.

### The Study

*Subjects.* The 64 students surveyed, 26 male and 38 female (mean age=17, SD=1.03), were language minority students from a major metropolitan high school with an over 50 percent Asian population, primarily from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Vietnam. The students are likely to be from various socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds due to the mixed SES communities near the school, although no SES data were collected from the subjects. The subjects were enrolled and evenly distributed among three Chinese language classes: Intermediate Mandarin for Native Speakers, World History for Native Speakers (conducted in Cantonese), and Advanced Mandarin for Non-native Speakers. All of the students spoke Chinese and/or Vietnamese to some degree before enrolling in the courses and all of the students reported having at least one LM parent. Nearly 52% of the subjects were Sino-Vietnamese. Their reported ability to speak both Chinese and Vietnamese probably reflects a different home and school language while living in Vietnam.

Students were asked to rate their own levels of L1 and English language ability in speaking, listening, reading, and writing on a Likert-type scale (1=not at all or a little, 2=somewhat, 3=well, and 4=very well). As shown in Table 1, a majority of the students reported high levels of L1 proficiency (M=3.3), with nearly 65% of the students reporting higher levels of L1 (M=3.3) than English (3.0).

Table 1  
*Means of Subjects' Self Reported Language Proficiency*

<i>L1 (N=62)</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Speaking	3.7
Listening	3.8
Reading	3.1
Writing	2.8
Average Mean	3.3
<i>English (N=59)</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Speaking	3.0
Listening	3.1
Reading	3.0
Writing	2.8
Average Mean	2.9

*Methods and Procedures.* A written survey in English was distributed to the students during their regular class periods. Both the teacher and researcher remained in the classroom to answer student questions and to translate or clarify specific questions for students with low levels of English proficiency.

The survey (see Appendix) sought biographical and language proficiency data, and asked subjects whether they had ever functioned as a language broker, and if so, for whom and under what circumstances. The survey included a brief definition of language brokering and examples of possible types of oral and written brokering. Subjects who had brokered were asked to indicate the agents for whom they had brokered and the places in which they had brokered by checking a list of possible responses, with space provided for additional answers. In addition, subjects were asked to read a list of quotes to select those reflecting their own opinions about brokering.

## Results

*Prevalence of brokering.* Table 2 shows that nearly 90% of the students indicated that they had brokered, with only about 8% reporting that they had never brokered. Interestingly, of the 5 subjects who answered negatively, 4 reported that they had an older sibling who brokered. About 3% selected "not sure," possibly reflecting their uncertainty about the definition of language brokering.

Table 2  
*Number of Chinese and Vietnamese Speakers Performing Language Brokering (N=64)*

	"Yes"		"No"		Not sure	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Have you ever brokered?	89.1	57	7.8	5	3.1	2

*Agents of Brokering.* When students were asked whom they brokered for, approximately 92% reported brokering for parents, with over 62% reporting brokering for friends. Over 56% also reported brokering for relatives (other than parents and siblings), and 50% noted

brokering for siblings. In addition, 37% indicated brokering for neighbors, over 34% brokered for teachers, and nearly 22% brokered for other school officials. One subject also reported brokering for "business people" and another noted that she brokered for "strangers" (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*People For Whom Students Brokered (N=64)*

	%	n
Parents	92.2	59
Friends	62.5	40
Relatives (other than parents and siblings)	56.3	36
Siblings	50.0	32
Neighbors	37.5	2
Teachers	34.4	22
School officials	21.9	14

*Sites of Brokering.* When asked where they brokered, over three-fourths of the subjects (80%) reported brokering at home, as noted in Table 4. Approximately 65% brokered at school and 64% brokered at the store. They brokered at post offices (25%), banks (23%), and government offices (17%), and added that they also brokered at hospitals, restaurants, work, and on the street.

Table 4  
*Places Where Students Brokered (N=64)*

	%	n
Home	79.7	51
School	65.6	42
Store	64.1	41
Post office	25.0	16
Bank	23.4	15
Gov. Offices	17.2	11

*Affective Findings.* Table 5 summarizes the affective findings. The subjects were asked to check from a list of attitude statements those that accurately reflected their own feelings about brokering. Over half of the students believed that brokering helped them learn more of their L1 and

L2 (56% and 58%, respectively) and about a third believed that it helped them learn more about their first (Chinese or Vietnamese) and second (American) cultures (36% and 38%, respectively). Nearly half of the subjects felt proud to broker, while a fewer number of subjects reported feeling embarrassed (11%) or burdened (17%). Over half of the subjects liked brokering (52%), with only 15% reporting disliking it. Nearly half of the subjects (45%) indicated that brokering caused them to be more independent and mature.

Table 5  
*Student Attitudes Toward Language Brokering (N=64)*

	%	n
Brokering helped me learn English	57.8	37
Brokering helped me learn more of my first language	56.3	36
I like to broker	51.6	33
I'm proud to broker	48.4	31
Brokering made me more independent and mature	45.3	29
Brokering didn't affect my first language or English language learning	42.2	27
I know American culture better because I brokered	37.5	24
I know my first culture better because I brokered	35.9	23
Brokering is a burden	17.2	11
I don't like to broker	14.1	9
I'm embarrassed to broker	10.9	7

The mean difference between subjects' age of arrival and the age at which they began brokering was 3.0 years ( $SD=3.63$ ). An examination of the data, however, revealed that the distribution was positively skewed, indicating that the median rather than the mean would provide a better indication of central tendency (Woods, Fletcher & Hughes, 1986). The median was only 1 year and the frequency distribution shows 52% of the subjects began brokering within one year of their arrival and 62% began brokering within two years of arrival. It should also be noted that only 52 of the 64 subjects were included in this analysis. Two of the subjects are U.S. born and ten subjects did not indicate the age at which they began brokering. Several indicated that they were not sure of the precise age they began, a likely explanation for the remaining missing reports.

### **Discussion**

The large number of subjects who reported having brokered reveals that language brokering is a common phenomenon among these LM students who represent various levels of L1 and L2 proficiency. The fact that only one subject out of 64 reported no brokering performed by themselves or their siblings strongly suggests that many, if not nearly all, LM students broker at some time, in some situations.

The data also provide support for a number of findings in the broker literature. First, students primarily broker for parents, but not exclusively, with a long list of beneficiaries ranging from close contacts to strangers. Second, brokers translated and interpreted in a wide array of venues that included home and school, and many other common daily settings. Third, brokers believed their experiences spurred their L1 and L2 language acquisition. Considering the little research that has been done on language learning situated outside of the classroom, data from this study and other broker research suggests that further examination is warranted.

The attitudinal data show that brokering has an impact on LM students' concepts of themselves. The subjects reported benefits of increased independence and maturity, though they also felt that brokering experiences brought additional burden. The numerous effects of brokering indicate that LM students contend with affective factors unlikely to be encountered by their peers.

The high percentage of students who began brokering within one year of arrival shows that English language acquisition is occurring in LM communities and at a rapid pace. This supports the findings by Pease-Alvarez (1993), who studied language development of 64 eight- to nine-year old Latino students. She found that despite their limited exposure to English, the predominance of socializing in and out of the home in Spanish, and a strong community commitment to bilingualism, her subjects were shifting from Spanish to English in usage and proficiency. The widespread notions that LM students resist learning English or that their acquisition is retarded by efforts to maintain their first language are contradicted by the evidence on language shift (see for example Fishman, 1991) and the results of this study.

Brief informal interviews with a few of the students revealed that they believed strongly in the importance of acquiring English, in addition to valuing their L1. The results of this study suggest that maintaining or developing the L1 does not hinder English acquisition (Krashen, 1996). In addition, despite the fact that several reported living and learning in L1-rich environments at home and in school (several mentioned communicating almost exclusively in their L1 at home and socializing primarily in their L1 with peers even at school), they appear to be acquiring English well enough to handle the difficult task of brokering. McQuillan and Tse (1995) found that child brokers translated texts in their second language that are far above grade level, such as mortgage documents, tax forms, and letters and notes intended for their parents. As Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) found, bilingual children who translate are quite accurate. This evidence strongly suggests that brokers develop high levels of language proficiency in order to perform interpretation and translation tasks. It could be that the acquisition of English is being achieved at a more rapid pace than generally believed.

### **Implications**

The number of Chinese and Vietnamese speakers in the United States over the age of 5 increased substantially in the 10 years between 1979 and 1989, 62% for Chinese and a striking 150% for Vietnamese, and Asian and Pacific Island languages are spoken by 14% of speakers of languages other than English (McArthur, 1993). Understanding the factors that contribute to this and other LM populations' language learning and acculturation processes is vital if educators are to better serve these rapidly growing populations.

There are several implications of brokering that are important for teachers and policy makers who are concerned with the education of LM students. First, brokers are making educational decisions independently which may or may not be in the best interest of the student. Schools that provide bilingual support services to students and their families may be able to ease some of the stress and burden experienced by brokers and thereby increase the chances for their success.

Second, brokers appear to be acquiring English with speed and efficiency, though their true levels of proficiency may not be accurately

assessed by using psychometric tests and other assessment tools that are decontextualized or inauthentic. Situated and authentic tasks like those involved in real-life language brokering may yield more accurate reflections of students' true ability. Finding authentic and accurate measures are necessary to provide students with the appropriate educational assistance.

Finally, students who are called upon to convey information and concepts in a variety of situations gain linguistic, cultural, and world knowledge that teachers may be able to incorporate into learning experiences for all students. These uniquely well-informed students may also be rich sources of insight for educators interested in establishing and improving home-school relations.

As the number of LM students continues to grow in the United States, discovering and understanding the complex factors that affect and determine their educational experiences are crucial for their ultimate success. By getting clearer understandings of these experiences, educators will be better equipped to make the most beneficial pedagogical and policy decisions for LM students.

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Appendix  
Language Broker Survey

The purpose of this survey is to find out how common language brokering is. Your participation is voluntary and anonymous, and the results will only be used anonymously for research purposes and will in no way affect your grade. Completing this survey will take about 10 minutes.

If you have interpreted or translated between two people who would not otherwise be able to communicate, you have brokered. Here are a few examples of brokering: 1) translating a notice brought home from school for your parents who don't know English well, 2) interpreting what your friends or parents say to a clerk at the grocery store, bank, post office or government office, or 3) writing letters or notes for someone who is unable to or uncomfortable with using English. We want to find out if you have ever been a language broker, and if so, when and under what circumstances. Please answer the questions below honestly and thoroughly.

1) Year in school: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: M F

2) Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

3) If born outside of this country, age of arrival to the U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

4) Number of brothers and their ages: \_\_\_\_\_

5) Number of sisters and their ages: \_\_\_\_\_

6) Language(s) your mother knows: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your mother's language ability by using this scale:  
**1=not at all or a little, 2=somewhat, 3=well, 4=very well.**

Language 1:	Language 2:
Speaking _____	Speaking _____
Listening _____	Listening _____
Reading _____	Reading _____
Writing _____	Writing _____

7) Language(s) your father knows:

Please rate your father's language ability by using this scale:

**1=not at all or a little, 2=somewhat, 3=well, 4=very well.**

Language 1:	Language 2:
Speaking_____	Speaking_____
Listening_____	Listening_____
Reading_____	Reading_____
Writing_____	Writing_____

8) Language(s) you know:

Please rate your own language ability by using this scale:

**1=not at all or a little, 2=somewhat, 3=well, 4=very well.**

Language 1:	Language 2:
Speaking_____	Speaking_____
Listening_____	Listening_____
Reading_____	Reading_____
Writing_____	Writing_____

9) Have you ever brokered (circle one)?:    yes        no        not sure

10) At what age did you begin brokering?:  
\_\_\_\_\_

11) Are you still brokering?    yes                    no

12) If no, how many years ago did you stop? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why?

13) Do your brothers and sisters broker? Which one(s) (include their current ages)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

14) Who have you brokered for (check as many as applicable)?  
 \_\_\_ parents                    \_\_\_ brothers/sisters    \_\_\_ friends  
 \_\_\_ other relatives            \_\_\_ neighbors            \_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_ school officials                    other: \_\_\_\_\_

15) Where have you brokered (check as many as applicable)?

home  school  store  bank

post office  government offices

other: \_\_\_\_\_

16) Which of the following describe how you feel about the language brokering you've done? (check all that apply to you):

"I'm proud to be a broker."

"I'm embarrassed to broker."

"Brokering is a burden."

"Brokering helped me learn English."

"Brokering helped me learn more of my first language."

"Brokering didn't affect my first language or English language learning."

"Brokering made me more independent and mature."

"I like to broker."

"I don't like to broker."

"I know my first culture better because I brokered."

"I know American culture better because I brokered."

17) If you are willing to be interviewed about your language brokering experiences, give your name and phone number below. **THIS IS OPTIONAL.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_